

Congress Questions Binary Weapons Plan

A new report by the General Accounting Office pokes holes in the Administration's justification for chemical munitions

Opponents of the Reagan Administration's plan to build new binary chemical weapons recently received some fresh ammunition from the General Accounting Office (GAO). The agency's auditors concluded, in a report released on 5 May, that the Administration has amassed insufficient evidence to support its claim that binary weapons are both needed and highly useful. "The general picture is that the chemical weapon system is not perceived as a credible deterrent, little is known about its functioning or its usefulness, and a large amount of money is being sought for it. We are particularly concerned that so many questions remain unanswered," the GAO report states.*

Acting at the request of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, GAO auditors examined open literature and classified documents in search of evidence that the Soviet Union has a substantial offensive capability in chemical warfare, as the Administration claims. They also looked for evidence that existing U.S. stocks of chemical weapons are too small to offset the Soviet threat. They searched for evidence that binary weapons, which contain two nonlethal chemicals that combine in mid-air to form a toxic gas, are superior to existing, unitary weapons, which contain just the toxic gas. Finally, they looked for evidence that the Administration's plan will bring the Soviets to their knees at Geneva, where negotiations are under way to ban all chemical weapons. In each instance, they found little substantiation.

Representative Clement Zablocki (D-Wis.), who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee, says that the report raises "many disturbing questions," and that it "underscores the importance of our pursuing a chemical weapons arms control agreement, rather than initiating a chemical arms race." He hopes that its publication will induce others in the House to endorse H.R. 822, which would delete all funds for binary weapons production without disrupting plans for enhanced defensive measures. As of 5 May, the measure had 79 co-sponsors. Last year, a similar measure attracted 251 votes.

The Pentagon is of course unhappy. Theodore Gold, the deputy assistant sec-

retary of defense for chemical matters, says that the report is "absurd, and filled with errors." He says that many of GAO's questions would have been answered if only they had read the most appropriate material and spoken to the most appropriate officials, including himself. The GAO explains that its research was finished last spring, before Gold was appointed, and that in any event, Gold declined to rebut a draft of the report with specific information.

The GAO concludes that the Administration's estimates of Soviet capabilities are highly uncertain. "In some cases, the reasoning seems to have been based on presumed knowledge of the Soviet chemical warfare inventory from World War II, lack of evidence that these weapons were ever destroyed, knowledge of current Soviet weapons delivery systems, and assumptions that the Soviets would have updated their capability. The extent of this guesswork can be seen in estimates that are given for the proportions of Soviet shells, warheads, and bombs containing lethal chemicals—they range from 10 to 50 percent."

The implication is that by relying on old information about weapons and fresh data about Soviet defensive capabilities, the United States might be overestimating Soviet offensive capabilities. Gold admits that "we don't know everything we need to know, such as the size and mix of their chemical arsenal, but we know something about their production capability, we know they have a stockpile, and we know the agents and type of delivery systems they have. It adds up to a persuasive case that the Soviets have a formidable capability to wage chemical warfare."

The GAO report says that even the size and reliability of the existing U.S. stockpile is highly uncertain, a claim that Gold also denies. "This is a serious charge, and totally false," he says. "There is a valid question about what the usefulness of the stockpile will be at the end of the decade, and we have an expert committee, chaired by John Margrave of Rice University, that is looking into this right now. But we know the size of the stockpile today."

The GAO also suggests that the United States lacks a coherent doctrine for waging chemical warfare, and says that "no steps are being taken to protect

civilian populations." It notes that the Institute for Defense Analyses is only now attempting to assess the value of specific chemical weapons on the battlefield, as well as the most appropriate mix of chemical and conventional weapons. Again, Gold disagrees. "Particularly over the last several years, we have been evolving several things that would fall under the description of doctrine," he says.

The GAO also questions whether binary weapons will be superior to existing, unitary weapons. It points out that the binary Bigeye bomb, which is to be dropped from aircraft, will be difficult to control, as it must be activated while en route to a target and released within a few minutes for maximum effectiveness. If the release mechanism should fail, the Bigeye could overheat and detonate beneath the plane. Gold acknowledges that this is a problem, and says that the Administration will delay production of the Bigeye until its design is improved.

The GAO report goes on to imply that money intended for binary production might be better spent on defensive training, an area where the Soviets genuinely appear to be ahead. Only 14 hours of U.S. Army basic training are now devoted to nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare. Defensive equipment also needs work. Although the standard U.S. chemical protection suit can be worn consecutively for 14 days, no system has been provided for the disposal of bodily wastes. In addition, the mask partly obstructs vision. The GAO noted that "all the sources we reviewed agree that the services have between zero and limited ability" for protection of soldiers and civilians in groups.

Finally, the GAO report says that the Administration has failed to adequately study the impact of binary weapons production on the prospects for arms control. "While it seems that binaries present new and possibly greater verification problems, little is known about what the specific problems are or their possible solution," the report says. This conclusion, like the others, is obviously disputed by the Administration. But one thing is clear: If the Administration wants to win friends and influence people on the chemical warfare issue, it will have to make a better public presentation of the facts.—**R. JEFFREY SMITH**

*"Chemical Warfare: Many Unanswered Questions," (GAO/IPE-83-6, General Accounting Office, Washington, D.C., 29 April 1983).